

Doctor Curtis Hepburn

by Hugh T. Kerr

One day — it was the 23d of September in the year 1911, — the people in the business section of the great city of New York heard the wonderful bell of the Brick Presbyterian Church tolling again and again. They looked up and listened and wondered. You know “tolling” means “telling,” for it used to be the custom when people died that the church bell would “tell” their age — that is it would toll as many times as the years they had lived, just as a clock strikes to tell the hours.

It seemed on that September day as if the great church bell of the old Brick Church would never stop. It struck one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and then on to fifteen, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, and still it kept on tolling, ninety, ninety-one, ninety-two, three, four, five, ninety-six. Ninety-six years! It had counted out nearly a hundred years, almost a century.

The bell was telling the world that the person who had died was ninety-six years old. That would mean he was born away back in 1815. He had been the oldest living graduate of Princeton University and he used to tell how when he started to college from his home in Pennsylvania he travelled by stage-coach, there being no railroads, and it took him seventy-two hours, that is nearly a week, travelling as he did only in daylight.

I must tell you this grand old man's name. His name was Dr. James Curtis Hepburn — people called him Hepburn of Japan. He was Dr. Hepburn. He was not a minister though he often preached. He was not a teacher though he often taught. He was a physician, a real doctor who helped people get well and keep well. And yet he was more than a doctor and more than a preacher and more than a teacher, for he was something of each and still a little more than all. Busy as he was, healing and helping people, his greatest work was translating the Bible into the Japanese language and making a dictionary of the Japanese language so that people who knew English could learn to read and write in the native tongue of Japan. Is it not strange that a doctor should do such an odd piece of work as translating the Bible and writing a dictionary?

Let me tell you a story to show how odd it was.

When Dr. Hepburn was in college he thought he knew what he liked better than his teachers, and thought it would be better for him to study science and chemistry instead of wasting his time in studying such old musty things as Latin and Greek. He fussed about it and talked about it and scolded about it and made so much trouble about it that Dr. Green, the president of the college, called him into his study one day and said to him: “I hear you have a poor opinion of the Latin and Greek writers;” and then with a twinkle in his eye he said, “What have you discovered that is so out-of-the-way with them?” The young lad said he hated to waste so much time over them. The president immediately said, “It seems to me you have an abundance of time. You are not yet fifteen and you have plenty of time to make the acquaintance of those interesting old gentlemen.” The dear old president and the independent boy talked on until the lad felt there were some things he did not yet know and went quietly back to his task and became a fine student of language, and years after he was able to do so much to make the language of Japan known and read by men of other lands. It was for this great service that the Mikado, — Mitsuhiro the Great — gave him the high honour of belonging to the Japanese “Order of the Rising Sun.”

If I were preaching a sermon and not telling a story I would urge you to remember two things. First, that it is a great thing to have a dear good teacher who knows more than we do, and who knows how to smile and laugh and to be pleasant while he points out the wisdom of travelling over

a hard road.

Second, that sometimes God does not tell us what He wants us to do and yet He leads us in right paths for His name's sake. He was leading Dr. Hepburn and, before he was aware, planning his life for him. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts and His ways better than our ways.

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